



General Jacqueline D. Van Ovost is Commander of U.S. Transportation Command (DOD)

# An Interview with Jacqueline D. Van Ovost

*JFQ: How has the shift in national guidance toward pacing and other threats to our country, allies, and partners impacted the focus of your command?*

General Jacqueline D. Van Ovost, USAF, is the 14<sup>th</sup> Commander of U.S. Transportation Command.

**General Van Ovost:** The character of war is changing, and our nation faces direct challenges across all domains, including daily adversarial activity in the cyber realm. From competition to conflict, these changes drive accompanying shifts in how U.S. Transportation Command is approaching the applica-

tion of our global logistics capability. From ensuring the joint force can defend our homeland, support our allies and partners, protect our interests abroad, deter potential adversaries, and transport combat power to prevail, this command stands ready to deliver.

As an enterprise, we are the engine that propels the National Defense Strategy by underwriting the lethality of the joint force and ensuring the viability of deterrence options, providing our national leadership with strategic flexibility. Integrated deterrence relies on the ability to maneuver credible forces to their point of need. USTRANSCOM's global posture sets conditions to enable their desired application. This begins at home, with a robust and resilient national transportation infrastructure and stretches around the world to our allies and partners who provide the necessary access, basing, and overflight to ensure our freedom of maneuver. When combined with our incredible industry partners that provide scalable capacity and access to global transportation networks, we provide a true asymmetric and strategic advantage for our nation.

While we have had great success over our 35-year history as a combatant command, we know we must continue to innovate and accelerate the changes necessary to remain ready now and into the future. We have sharpened our focus on air and maritime fleet recapitalization and modernization, along with new concepts of operation to ensure we can deploy rapidly in a contested environment. We are exercising with our allies and partners as well as industry to enhance our logistics networks and increase interoperability—for example, building partner capacity to move cargo and repair aircraft and, for our industry partners, providing mariner training in underway replenishment and tactical maneuvering.

Building enduring advantages begins by addressing critical vulnerabilities. Investing in and hardening a resilient defense ecosystem will strengthen our commercial and military transportation networks and create advantages across multiple domains, especially space and cyber. We expect disruption in our

operations and are focused on cyber-mission assurance and digital modernization to ensure our ability to conduct globally integrated C2 [command and control] and generate decision advantage. With significant volumes of data and advanced analytics, we can posture efficiently, recover quickly, and accelerate the application of our capacity.

Finally, people are our most valuable resource and will make the difference between victory and defeat. We continue to develop our warfighting team with a competitive “fight tonight” mindset, acknowledging the challenges present today. By embracing the imperative to be ready now and into the future, our people understand the mission and are continually adapting to maintain our nation’s competitive advantage in power projection.

***JFQ:** Given the constant calls on your command to respond through warfighting demands, do you have all the capabilities you need, looking as far in the future as you can? In what areas of capability are you most concerned?*

**General Van Ovost:** The purpose of USTRANSCOM is to project and sustain the joint force at a time and place of our nation’s choosing. The speed and reliability at which we can execute our diverse mission sets demonstrate our resolve and influence the decision calculus of our adversaries. To talk about capabilities for today, and for the future, let me start by discussing our Warfighting Framework, which is the synchronization of three elements: our global mobility posture, capacity, and global command, control, and integration.

Our adversaries look to degrade our power projection capabilities. During my testimony to Congress, I explained that we must continually assess and refine our posture to meet the evolving geopolitical landscape and focus on strengthening and diversifying our infrastructure and agreements to maintain this advantage. Global mobility posture is the foundation of our ability to project power. It

starts here at home, with the installations and infrastructure, such as ports, highways, and railways, to mobilize and deploy forces. The ability to leverage a distributed and scalable logistics network is highly dependent on our deep bench of diplomatically aligned allies and partners. Their support, garnered through diplomacy and geographic commander relationship building, secures the critical access, basing, and overflight that enable our freedom of maneuver around the world. This is one of our greatest strategic advantages. With our posture secured, USTRANSCOM can bring our considerable mobility capacity to bear.

As recent events have demonstrated, our capacity is inextricably linked to our commercial partners and the Total Force. This applies to both daily capacity and the ability to seamlessly transition to a wartime footing where volunteerism and early access authorities become critical. With about 85 percent of the joint force residing in the continental United States [CONUS], airlift, sealift, rail, road, air refueling, and port capacity are vital for throughput. Without credible, survivable, and agile capacity, we run the risk of not being able to maneuver the force in time to deter or prevail.

The most recent Mobility Capability Requirements Study found our current mobility capacity sufficient but at increasing levels of risk due to the focused efforts of our adversaries, coupled with the erosion of readiness in key mobility capability areas. My biggest concerns in this area are sealift and air refueling.

Sealift is vital to delivering decisive force; in times of war, 90 percent of military cargo is transported in this manner. In 10 years, approximately 70 percent of U.S. Government-owned surge sealift ships, which are critical to these movements, will reach the end of their life. Working with the [U.S.] Maritime Administration, we have begun a sealift recapitalization program under which we have completed the purchase of two used vessels, but the process must be accelerated if we are to keep pace with the retirement schedule. Additionally, we have been taking steps to address the DOD shortfall in meeting wartime fuel delivery

demands and the continued reliance on the use of foreign flag tankers. Congress recently approved the Tanker Security Program, which will bolster our ability to conduct sustainment operations at sea. This capability is critical when we consider a theater such as USINDOPACOM [U.S. Indo-Pacific Command].

The air refueling fleet is key to rapid global mobility and the lifeblood of our ability to deploy and employ the immediate force. When the last KC-46 is assessed into the Air Force, the average age of the remaining KC-135s will be 67 years old, with the commensurate readiness concerns that brings. It is critical that the Air Force continues a full recapitalization program to maintain credible capability.

Finally, the evolving ability of peer adversaries to interdict our logistics capabilities across all domains presents considerable challenges, especially for global command, control, and integration. We expect that the flow of goods and services (and our supply chain) will be disrupted or degraded. We must rethink how we maneuver combat power and logistics across a vast theater of operations. Integration of logistics planning and execution with all joint warfighting functions is essential for success, as we operate against adversaries capable of affecting both our systems and networks and those used by our commercial partners.

***JFQ:** In your testimonies from your confirmation to this year’s posture hearings, you mentioned cyber threats to USTRANSCOM, particularly in the C2 area. How is your team progressing in addressing this set of threats?*

**General Van Ovost:** Global command, control, and integration remains central to being able to align scarce mobility resources to our highest strategic priorities. The ability to command and control is enabled by a portfolio of IT systems and relies on secure networks, making cyber domain mission assurance one of my top priorities.

When we hear the term cyber security, the first thing we usually think





about is technology because it is the most tangible. We are pursuing several technological initiatives to harden our terrain and improve our ability to continuously monitor for, and detect signs of, unusual activity. The biggest change we are making is moving to Zero Trust, a cyber security framework that embeds security throughout the architecture to prevent malicious actors from accessing our most critical assets. We started by partnering closely with U.S. Cyber Command to implement core

Zero Trust principles on our classified network, which will inform Zero Trust implementation throughout the DOD information enterprise.

Countering the cyber threat will take more than just technology; there is also the human aspect. Moreover, we must raise the level of cyber readiness for all, not just those who have cyber or IT in their job description. For this reason, we are focused on creating a culture in which everyone embraces the individual responsibility to be a cyber defender,

maintaining cyber discipline and vigilance as we operate every day.

With USTRANSCOM's inextricable link with commercial transportation providers, we also remain focused on strengthening partnerships with them to mitigate vulnerabilities. Several years ago, we included language in our Readiness Transportation Service Provider contracts, requiring them to conduct an annual cyber security self-assessment of their compliance with National Institute of Standards





Airmen assigned to 305<sup>th</sup> Aerial Port Squadron upload Multiple Launch Rocket System munitions onboard Boeing 767 at Joint Base McGuire-Dix-Lakehurst, New Jersey, August 13, 2022, as part of security assistance package for Ukraine (U.S. Air Force/Matt Porter)

and Technology security controls. Our analysis that follows their self-reporting shows that compliance continues to improve each year, which highlights our partners' understanding of the importance of implementing sound cyber security practices.

Continuous learning is critical to staying ahead of the cyber threat, so we now have an incredible amount of information-sharing and collaboration happening with our commercial providers. We also have some special projects ongoing that link up

select providers with certain DOD intelligence agencies to help them see themselves more clearly and buy down risk. We are all making progress in mitigating the cyber threat but also know there is more work to be done to build collective resilience.

*JFQ: What leadership lessons have helped you pull together diverse organizational cultures both in your command as well as across government, the commercial industry, and international partners?*

**General Van Ovost:** My approach to problem-solving in any organization is to cast the net wider, not smaller. Diversity of background, thought, and experience is a source of strength. Each person brings a unique viewpoint, and complex problems are best solved by empowered teams contributing from different perspectives. But it is not enough to simply invite talent to the table. Trust is foundational to high-performing teams, and the baseline of trust is ensuring transparency

and treating everyone with dignity and respect. It is our responsibility as leaders to guarantee an inclusive culture, in which everyone is inspired to contribute to the mission and grow.

As far as working with industry and international partners, it is very much the same: understand what their interests are and what perspective they bring to the enterprise. As I have stated, we cannot achieve our tremendous accomplishments without the support of our partners and the resources they bring. In our engagements with industry heads and partner-nation leaders, it is important to understand their motivation to work with us and how our partnership can benefit them. Our adversaries are quite adept at using economic and diplomatic influence to stymie our national interests, so we must counter this ability by showing the commercial carriers and our partners and allies that working with us is mutually beneficial.

*JFQ: Clearly our defense transportation networks rely heavily on bases, ports, highways, railroads, and waterways, as well as the entire DOD transportation network and that of the rest of the country. What are the most pressing issues your command has identified here at home, and what are you doing to address them?*

**General Van Ovost:** Our national infrastructure, from our roadways and ports to the energy sector, is essential to our ability to project power from the homeland. When we consider not only the physical structures but also the associated systems and networks across the transportation enterprise, there is a tremendous amount of surface area for adversaries to target. Cyber attacks, kinetic attacks, or loss of GPS [global positioning system] would disrupt our operations.

Our adversaries have advanced significantly in their ability to target the homeland through both kinetic and nonkinetic means, so we must find innovative ways to mitigate the effects. Fortunately, studies have shown that the robust U.S. infrastructure makes our transportation network resilient, and we

are able to use effective logistical planning to mitigate any delays. We must ensure that infrastructure is protected and modernized to support our national objectives. Doing so requires deliberate investment in key areas. For command and control, advanced data analytics and artificial intelligence/machine-learning [AI/ML] capabilities will help to accelerate force generation and decisionmaking on how to best apply our finite resources to meet demand in peacetime and wartime. In support of this, we must harden cyber terrain that facilitates their [AI/ML] use—including commercial, public, and military systems.

In the homeland, the recently passed Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act [IIJA] represents opportunities to reinforce and modernize strategic components of our national transportation system and increase resiliency. Although the IIJA contains elements that will, in the aggregate, improve U.S. transportation infrastructure, none is assessed to be uniquely or directly beneficial to the USTRANSCOM mission. We will continue to work with USDOT [U.S. Department of Transportation], state DOTs, and other transportation agencies to communicate our transportation infrastructure needs and to influence the prioritization of discretionary investment.

One key initiative that we will continue to advocate for, in collaboration with our partners in the Federal Highway Administration [FHWA] and the American Association of State Highway and Transportation Officials, is the adoption of a Military Strategic Transportation Program [MSTP]. This proposed program would support and incentivize state DOTs to prioritize highway projects that are critical to national defense. Absent the adoption of the MSTP, and with the support of FHWA, I have directly communicated specific highway investment needs to key state leaders. I am hopeful that they will consider these needs as they develop their prioritized plans.

Overall, while our infrastructure is robust and resilient, as a nation we must continue the necessary investments to keep it that way. We also need to ensure

that we are adequately addressing potential single points of failure in our overall network such as the Port of Alaska. Finally, we need to continue giving special attention to needed investments at DOD's common-user munition terminals, which are unique in their ability to support large volume/high-net explosive weight missions safely and efficiently to keep them viable and in a high state of readiness.

In a future conflict, there will be attacks that seek to prevent force projection from CONUS. We will have to fight to get to the fight, but we *will* get there.

*JFQ: Often USTRANSCOM capabilities and your people perform important and emerging crisis responses that the average person might not know about, such as the recent baby milk shortage. How does your command work with industry to balance the emerging and enduring requirements?*

**General Van Ovost:** Our ability to project military forces is inextricably linked to commercial industry, which provides critical transportation capacity and global networks to meet day-to-day and wartime requirements. Certainly, there are situations that call for capabilities that only reside in our organic military assets, but we consider many factors, such as timeliness, cost, safety and the threat environment, cargo type, and asset availability to determine the right mix. The historic noncombatant evacuation last year out of Afghanistan is a perfect example. We used military airlift, primarily C-17s, to fly into and out of Kabul because these aircraft represented the best option due to their training and defensive capabilities for that environment. The noncombatants were then flown to intermediate staging bases that were in safe locations for additional processing. After, they were transloaded to commercially contracted planes for the remainder of their journey.

*JFQ: Acknowledged as the largest crisis airlift of people in history, what can you tell us about how the withdrawal from Afghanistan developed and what you*





Evacuees from Afghanistan board Boeing 777 bound for United States from Naval Air Station Sigonella, Italy, August 28, 2021, as part of Operation Allies Refuge (U.S. Navy/Kaila V. Peters)

*might have done differently or lessons your command learned?*

**General Van Ovost:** The Afghanistan operation was a tremendous undertaking, and I am incredibly proud of the men and women across the enterprise who made it possible. The success of the effort hinged on effective coordination and communication across the various departments and Services, our commercial partners, and our allies and partners. I was immensely proud to see the time and effort we put into these relationships paying off and saving lives.

With a situation evolving so quickly, like the Afghanistan NEO [noncombatant evacuation operation],

communication is critical. One of the key lessons learned for us was finding ways to flatten our communication with our commercial partners. We found that we did not have the systems set up to quickly share key information for the commercial carriers as they were working through their own decision processes, so it was essential for us to implement changes that now allow us to communicate quickly with our partners at the classified as well as unclassified level.

During the COVID pandemic, we created a series of working groups with rail, road, air, and sea transportation service providers. We established a weekly battle rhythm with all of them to transmit information and receive concerns about

operations through various nodes, the restrictions and the impacts on cargo loading, temperature control, and ensuring the safety of our people. Each week we dealt with a new series of problems. We solved them and we moved on. The biggest lesson learned is that we must coordinate and communicate through and despite the disruptions rather than try to avoid disruptions altogether. This taught us to identify areas in which we could increase the resilience of our transportation networks and our people. During the Afghanistan NEO, we kept that same structure of communication and just changed the content. We did not have to create new relationships, and we moved at the speed of trust.





U.S. Air Force KC-135 Stratotanker aircraft assigned to 100<sup>th</sup> Air Refueling Wing, Royal Air Force Mildenhall, England, refuels U.S. Air Force F-22 Raptor aircraft assigned to 90<sup>th</sup> Fighter Squadron, Joint Base Elmendorf–Richardson, Alaska, over Poland, August 10, 2022 (U.S. Air Force/Kevin Long)





Industry partners are essential to our ability to project and sustain the joint force. Afghanistan demonstrated just how much they contribute and what we can accomplish when the enterprise is well synchronized. Getting commercial carriers involved early in the planning process and keeping them in the loop with the latest available information will be essential for any future operation, whether it is humanitarian aid/disaster relief or operations in a contested environment.

*JFQ: Another crisis response that has tested your command's capabilities short of wartime, the Russian war on Ukraine, has provided some unique challenges. Can you talk about what you have learned so far, and how that might shape your thinking about other potential responses in the future?*

**General Van Ovost:** The situation in Ukraine brought to the forefront the importance of logistics and the complexity of power projection and sustainment. Our support to Ukraine would not be possible without the strong relationships we have with our allies and partners, who provided the access, basing, and overflight to facilitate the delivery of aid. As I mentioned earlier with the communication efforts initiated during the COVID pandemic, we took that model, adapted it to the Afghanistan NEO, and weaponized it in the support of Ukraine and our NATO [North Atlantic Treaty Organization] Allies.

We proved that we can quickly and efficiently move massive amounts of equipment and materiel halfway around the world, while Russia struggled to effectively supply troops just 75 miles from their border. We make it look easy because we work hard on building and strengthening that robust network of allies and partners, as well as our commercial capacity, that we can leverage in times of crisis.

The Ukraine operations underscore the importance of having an agile mobility force, with both a strategic airlift fleet that can delivery immediately, within hours of notification, and the available

sealift that can deliver a much greater volume of materiel that is essential to delivering and sustaining a decisive force. Working across the enterprise to draw equipment from different locations around the globe, transport it into Europe, and transfer it to our partners that take it directly to the battlefield has been a remarkable feat and demonstrates the value of our partnerships.

*JFQ: What have you learned from your experiences as a senior officer involved in joint, international, government, and commercial operations that would be important for more junior officers to know?*

**General Van Ovost:** The demands outlined by the National Defense Strategy and the implications of failure to our democracy have made it clear that we are all in this fight together, and the stakes have never been higher. Our adversaries continue to grow all-domain threat capabilities on par with our own in some areas and with the momentum to surpass us in others. They have studied our tactics and have well-prepared countermeasures. Without change, we could lose.

To maintain our advantage, develop leap-ahead capabilities, and revolutionize the way we operate, we need to trust and empower our people and continue to strengthen our relationships with allies, partners, and industry. Because when it comes down to it, it is less about technology and more about people and culture. Invest your time developing your team—people are our most valuable resource and will make the difference between victory and defeat.

Our people, allies, partners, and industry partners provide us the ability to adapt our operations, shape our capabilities, evolve our operational concepts, and make the investments required to provide the strength to win against any competitor. JFQ